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ABSTRACT

This study examined nongraded, multi-age elementary classrooms from the perspective of involved principals, teachers, and parents. Data came from field notes taken at on-site observations and from in-person structured and unstructured interviews with principals and teachers. The schools were all located in a small urban town in north central Mississippi. The study found that the schools set up and operated the nongraded classrooms in different ways. The classrooms operated according to the philosophy of the teachers in charge of the classes under the guidance of the principal; each classroom was different from the next. The schools that experienced the most success were those in which the teachers did not feel threatened and were given the freedom to operate as they deemed appropriate. Some parent concerns included mixing the sexes, having siblings in the same room, giving up traditional grading and assessment, and possibly short-changing math. Keeping parents continually informed and working together with the school, teacher, and students were important guiding principles to ensure success, according to one principal. Another principal stated that authentic assessment was the key to success. (Contains 8 references.) (SM)

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INSIDE THE ONE ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE

A LOOK AT NONGRADED CLASSROOMS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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As the twenty-first century rapidly approaches, many of our schools operate in a time warp, locked into an archaic system of organization, instruction, and assessment. The world and society in which children must live is changing with astronomical speed while educational ideas and methods remain frozen in familiarity and unchanging routine. Shanker (1990) explains that our traditional model of schooling is opposite of the idea that students learn better actively, at different rates, and in different ways.

Gough (1990) points out that as education moved through the 1980's where the focus was on more of everything, (homework, days in school, testing, required courses, etc.) to the 1990's, the focus changed to restructuring our schools. This move toward educational reform was especially evident during what is often referred to as the "education decade" which began in 1957 and continued until 1967 (Goodlad 1970). Educators realized that the American School System which was very subject centered must begin to change to place the student at its center (Rollins 1968).

According to Lolli (1993) this need for change was needed due to societal changes and expectations. With our ever-changing society and technology we can no longer

place students into nice neat packages and expect them to learn the same material at the same rate and progress through the grades at the same speed. America's traditional model of education with its limitations and rigid confining structure will not enable the vast majority of students to be educated, as it never has (Shanker 1990).

Children must be viewed as unique individuals with different patterns of growth and learning abilities (Gutierrez & Slavin, 1992). Unfortunately, our present system of education still attempts to lock students into sitting still for several hours each day for learning (Shanker, 1990). In our attempts to bring about change and restructure our educational system, we have overlooked the need for restructuring the whole system in lieu of trying to change small parts such as test scores and discipline (Rubinstein, 1993).

As we approach the twenty-first century, the need for change becomes apparent when trying to meet the needs of our diverse population. Lolli stated, "It is time to organize the structure for all children."

This new structure can be reminiscent of the one-room schoolhouse which provided for a multiage approach to education. While the graded school system has been criticized for ignoring differences in individual learners, Goodlad (1966), found that nongrading or multiage grouping matched materials to the individual learners. The American Association of School Administrators (1992) defined the nongraded school as one in which students are allowed to progress from one skill level or

concept to the next whenever they are ready. Children do not pass or fail, but rather they progress at their own individual rate. Letter grades are also replaced with more authentic forms of assessment such as portfolios, videos and checklists. Goodlad (1966) offers his definition of the nongraded school,

> The nongraded school is designed to implement a theory of continuous pupil progress. Since the differences among children are great and since these differences cannot be substantially modified, school structure must facilitate the continuous educational progress of each pupil. Some pupils, therefore, will require a longer period of time than others for achieving certain learnings and attaining certain developmental levels.

These ungraded or multiage programs do not fit into any systematic organization which many adults would prefer, but rather reflect the way children develop and learn (Grant, 1993). In this way, these programs are better than methods of the past in accommodating the diverse student population which is now present in our schools.

The rationales for nongrading according to Gutierrez & Slavin (1992) are:

1. An alternative to retention as well as social promotion.
2. An alternative to more traditional forms of ability grouping which has been shown to be stigmatizing.
3. Elimination of grade labels while promoting individual instruction.

Smith (1968) goes on to list other rationales for nongrading:

1. Encouraging continuous steady progress of the individual child.
2. No fear of encroaching on work of the next grade.
3. Fewer discipline problems.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine nongraded elementary classrooms from the perspective of the principals, teachers, and parents involved. Research findings reported include a description of locations, and information concerning various aspects of the nongraded multiage programs currently in place in elementary schools chosen for this study.

Methodology

The data has been gather and transcribed from field notes gathered from on-site observations and in-person structured and unstructured interviews.

Findings

While educational reform is being spoken of in almost every article published, a trip to many schools will make you painfully aware that a lot of what is written is just talk and no action. Many of our schools are still in the lockstep pattern that has prevailed in our schools for many decades. Many students are made to sit quietly each day in rows of neatly aligned desks facing the front of the room while the teacher

imparts his/her wisdom to less than attentive students. And, teachers wonder why they have so many discipline problems. There are classes however, where students are encouraged to explore, experiment, and solve problems and engage in their learning.

The schools observed and people interviewed for this study were all located in a relatively small urban town located in north central Mississippi. Its population is approximately 30,000. There is much diversity in occupation in this community and industry and education seem to be foremost in the minds of its citizens as evidenced by the amount of industry and the progressive and innovative school system there.

My first observation and interview was at an elementary school which is located only three or four blocks from the downtown area. The building itself presented quite a striking picture from the outside when you first drove up. It was well maintained and in good condition to be what appeared as an old structure. The landscaping and surrounding grounds were well maintained. As I entered the building, I entered through glass doors which extended across the front. Once inside the tiled front room, I noticed the cleanliness of the room. The principal's office was to the left as you entered the front of the building. I was given a tour of the school and the multiage classes were pointed out to me on each of the two floors. On either side of the hall were adjoining rooms and a bathroom on one side. After the tour upstairs, I next went downstairs to tour the multiage classrooms on this floor. These were somewhat

similar to those upstairs with each retaining its own individual identity. These rooms had been decorated to suit each teacher's individual tastes. Murials decorated one of the classrooms while the other was done in a forest design with trees, sunsets, etc. painted on the walls. Not your average elementary classroom with blackboards and instructional boards.

After my tour, I went into the principal's office which looked like many I had seen before. It contained many of the same things you would expect to see in any principal's office. One item I noticed that I had not previously seen in a principal's office was a grandfather clock. As we began to talk, I was impressed with the friendliness and ease of conversation. As we began discussing the multiage program at the school, it was evident that she was sold on this idea and pleased with the results she has seen so far in her students, school, and parents.

This particular school has approximately 383 total students grade levels K-4. Of this number, approximately 66% are mixed age and 33% are regular classroom. I began my interview by asking the principal to tell me about her background in education as well as her background experience with nongraded classrooms. She said that her background was in special education and that she had been a principal at this school for two years. Her experience with nongraded classes went back to her own personal experience of being in a mixed class first through fourth grade level. Her children had also attended a Montessori School.

My next question was directed at the beginning of the program at her school. She said that they had a speaker come to their school for Industry Education Day to talk about school and business and the man brought it up. He could not understand the concept of children having a different teacher each nine months. In business, you do not move your employees around every nine months, so he wanted to know why children should change so often. He looked at this as a very abnormal procedure. After this, the teachers began talking and a teacher first approached her with this idea of multiage grouping. Then, through conversations with other teachers, the idea just blossomed and she brought it up in a staff meeting. As the teachers appeared to be interested, she told them to read everything they could find about it and they would discuss it further. They did, and then these teachers were sent to a workshop in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They also talked to the superintendent about this new idea and he was all for it. They were then sent to Aspen, Colorado to work with teachers there and upon their return, these teachers recruited three more teachers.

Our conversation now shifted to the attitudes and feelings of the parents about this new approach to their child's school setting. She smiled and shook her head as if to say there was quite a story behind this. She began by saying even before she could formally inform the parents of the changes to occur, word of mouth had spread the news all around the community. She had parents constantly calling her regarding these classes. She sent out a letter telling the parents there would be a meeting to tell

them all the details and she thought there would be a good response, but never did she expect the approximately 500 parents that showed up. The parents were interested in this new approach. There was a negative side to this however, Some parents viewed the selection process as a social issue. One parent in particular she recalled, followed her all around town wanting to get her child in one of these classes. She said that she would follow her to the grocery store, cleaners, and everywhere. Everytime she looked up she was there or calling her on the telephone. She became irate when her child was not included in these classes and even went to the superintendent. The end result was that since she did not get her way, she withdrew her child from this school and placed her in a private one.

I then asked her about the selection process for inclusion in these classes. She said that they could only accommodate a certain number of children so everyone who wished to have their child in these classes signed a permission slip before school started. Their child's name was then randomly selected. These groups are heterogeneously grouped and are only considered if the parents wish them to be. She went on to say that there is not a problem anymore as to enrollment because it works out and she has 66% mixed and 33% traditional.

Concerns voiced by parents:

(a) mixing the sexes - parents of male students want multiage while the parents of females tend to want single age. She attributed this to the fact that parents

of the females did not like the idea of a 5 year old being in the room all the time with a 9 year old male.

(b) Math - One parent was concerned that math was being short changed in in this arrangement. She said that math is still structured by grade level within these classes to insure that all objectives are met and they are working on other possibilities in this area.

(c) Brothers and sisters - Brothers and sisters in the same room was a concern because of the fighting between them at home. She stated how amazing it was but brothers and sisters tend to get along better when they are in the same room. They tend to help each other with their homework, etc. Discipline in in general has diminished because the older children tend to become role models for the younger students.

(d) Grades - One major problem for parents has been to give up grades. She has told parents that they will give a report card only if they must have one, but it will only be the teacher's opinion because of all the authentic assessment they do in place of paper and pencil exams.

I asked about how they kept parents informed concerning their child's progress if they did not have report cards, and she said that they sent home newsletters, and a report every 4 ½ weeks. They also have conferences and end of year reports. To begin the year, they hold a class meeting to inform the parents of their expectations.

One of the big advantages of this has been the strong positive relationship with the parents. This opinion was voiced by everyone interviewed, teachers, principals, and parents.

If teachers do not use paper and pencil tests in the way traditional classes do, I wanted to know how they assessed the learning. Benchmarks are set and videos are taken of learning in progress. Portfolios are also part of their new authentic assessment although she admitted that all teachers have not become comfortable with portfolios and just keep workfolders.

After we finished our conversation, one of the multiage teachers arrived and we went down to her room to talk. She is a veteran educator who has taught for 27 years and in her words "simply LOVES it." She said she gets so wrapped up in teaching somedays she forgets to go to lunch. This was really a treat for me, as most of the teachers I've been exposed to who have taught for this length of time are worn out and only talk about retiring. She kept saying she did not know anything about statistics or any of that stuff and she did not really know what I was interested in. Several times during our conversation, she mentioned that she did not know if I was interested in what she was showing me or not, but I reassured her that anything she could share with me was of interest. She talked and talked and talked about exactly what she taught them, and we truly had a conversation or unstructured interview with no preset questions. She uses a lot of centers and thematic units. They also do journaling

everyday. She said this is helpful to make them good writers and teach them to read. She kept referring to her class as THEIR room and not hers. She said the main thing about teaching is to keep their attention and I don't think she ever has a problem in this area. She has more energy and enthusiasm than any teacher I have ever met. You would think she was a first year teacher all excited about trying new and innovative ideas for the first time instead of someone who had been teaching for so many years.

I asked her why she went to this new way of teaching and she smiled and said "I didn't want to get stale." She then related about all the fears she had before starting this and how she was concerned about the people she works with. She ended up this by saying "I needed a change.

She also said how important it was to keep in contact with parents and that she felt a closeness with parents that she has never had before in all her years of teaching. This teacher just looks like what yhou would imagine a first grade teacher to look like. She was petite and just bubbling over with excitement about the prospect of another school year being so close to beginning. Her comments were much unlike comments I have heard from other teachers facing the end of summer and the beginning of another school year. Her final comment to me was that "We'll try anything." I thought that was a truly descriptive statement of this particular school which was not afraid to try new and innovative ideas. I do not think there is much chance of this school getting stale or dull.

I next traveled to another elementary school intending to speak to a principal who will implement this new grouping arrangement beginning with the fall school term. This school is also located in a nice neighborhood in the same community. The grounds are well kept and classrooms appear to have been recently cleaned in anticipation of the start of the new school year. This school houses approximately 520 students and will have five multiage classes this year. The principal at this school is a first-year principal last year. She came to this school from the Central Office. As she was out to lunch when I arrived at the school, I got the opportunity to speak for a while with three of the five teachers who will be working with the multiage classes. They were busy fixing up and moving their rooms to another room which will house their classes this year. Between two of the rooms the wall has been cut away for equal access to both classrooms. As I spoke with the three teachers as a group interview, I was amazed at the years of teaching experience among them. Their years of experience ranged from 12 to 30 years. At first these three teachers were reluctant to engage in conversation, probably because of the enormous amount of work they had before them, and I was an interruption to the plans they had made for the day. Once we sat down and began talking, even amid the vast task they were surrounded with, they exuded excitement for this proposed project. They told me that there would be five teachers doing multiage this year and there would be two teaching 6 and 7 year olds (they hesitated when discussing the age and finally said we're not

suppose to say it this way but two will be teaching 1st and 2nd and two will be teaching 3rd and 4th). It was evident that they had been through the training and knew the language. They said the teacher who has been teaching for 30 years will be teaching one grade of K-1 by herself in a self-contained classroom. According to these teachers, she wanted it that way. She felt she could work better with two age groups by herself.

I asked how they got interested in Multiage or nongraded and they replied that they kept hearing about it from teachers who were doing this the other schools. They visited the other schools and wanted to try it for themselves. I also asked them about their preparation for teaching multiage and they said they had read quite a lot about it and been to numerous conferences and workshops. They also had a staff meeting at which a speaker from the Society for Developmental Education came and spoke to them on Multiage. They told me of going to conferences in Birmingham, Alabama, to a school in Orlando, Florida and to a Multiage conference in Memphis along with a conference on Portfolio assessment.

When asked why they wanted to change, their answer was similar to the teacher at the previously visited school. One of the teachers said "You get in a slump - you need something."

These three teachers were most happy to share their as they called it "limited" knowledge with me, but were not as self assured of their abilities probably due to their

lack of experience in actual practice with this new process. As I could see the amount of work they had to accomplish, I thanked them for their time and went on to talk with the principal for a short time. Upon entering her office, it was basically the same as the previous principal's office except I did not see a grandfather clock. This principal appears to be confident in her position even though she was a first-year principal last year. She stated that when she heard about Multiage, she suggested it to the teachers. She also said that she has more problems from new parents than older ones. Older ones are more accepting to change which I found surprising.

I asked how teachers were assigned to these classes, and she said that no one is allowed to teach one of these until they have read and studied about it for a year. Until that time they are not given the responsibility to teach one of these classes.

She also sends out newsletters to keep parents informed and does not give report card grades. When telling parents about this new grouping arrangement, she sent a newsletter as well as telling the PTA board which took it from there. The principal did not appear as willing to share information with me as the previous principal which could have been due in part to her lack of experience with this program.

One closing remark she did make was that authentic assessment was the key to making this work. This was in contrast to the feelings I got from the other principal and teachers. They seemed to believe that it was not assessment, but the cooperative working relationship of parents, teachers, and students which made it successful.

CONCLUSIONS

It is the conclusion of the researcher that from observations of principals, teachers, parents, and the physical environment itself, that each school will set up and operate these classes in different ways. These classrooms will operate according to the philosophy of the teachers in charge of the classes under the guidance of the principal in each school. It is further concluded after talking with these teachers and principals that each class will be different from the next not unlike a traditional classroom. I do feel, however, that the multiage classes which will experience the greatest success are those in which the teachers do not feel threatened and are given the freedom to operate as they deem appropriate. Keeping parents always informed and working together with the school, teacher, and student must be one of the guiding principles to insure a successful program.

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